HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

The Secret of the Night --- By Gaston Leroux

THRILLING MYSTERY STORY OF RUSSIAN INTRIGUE BY NOTED FRENCH AUTHOR.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

Young Joseph Rouletabille, ostensibly a reporter for a Parisian newspaper but in fact a detective of renown is called to Russia by the Czar to save the life of General Trebassof (Feodor Feodorovitch), who has been condemned to death by the Nihilists. He is received by the General's ever-faithful and ever-watchful wife, Madame Trebassof (Matrena Petrovina). He meets Natacha, the General's daughter by a previous marriage.

The General is at his villa, surrounded by a few faithful friends.

THEY then drank more, amid a perfect fracas of talk and laughter, Ivan Petrovitch and more, amid a perfect fracas of talk and laughter. Ivan Petrovitch and Athanase Georgevitch walked across and kissed the general. Rouletabille saw all around him great children who amused themselves with unbelievable naivete and who drank in a fashion more unbelievable still. Matrena Petrovna smoked cigarettes of yellow tobacco incessantly, rising almost continually to make a hurried round of the rooms, and after having prompted the servants to greater watchfulness, sat and looked long at Rouletabille, who did not stir, but caught every word, every gesture of each one there. Finally, sighing, she sat down by Feodor and asked how his leg felt. Michael and Natacha, in a corner, were deep in conversation, and Boris watched them with obvious impatience, still strumming at the guzla. But the thing that struck Rouletabille's youthful imagination beyond all else was the mild face of the general. He had not imagined the terrible Trebassof with so paternal and sympathetic an expression. The Paris papers had printed redoubtable pictures of him, more or less authentic, but the arts of photography and engraving had cut vigorous, rough features of an official who knew no pity. Such pictures were in perfect accord with the idea one naturally had of the dominating figure of the government at Moscow, the man who, during eight days—the Red Week—had made so many corpses of students and workmen that the halls of the University and the factories had opened their doors since in vain. The dead would have had to arise for those places to be peopled! Days of terrible battle, where in one quarter or another of the city there was naught but massacre or burnings, until Matrena Petrovna and her step-daughter, Natacha (all the papers told of it), had fallen on their knees before the general and begged terms for the last of the revolutionaries, at bay in the Presnia quarter, and had been refused by him. "War is war," had been his answer, with irrefutable logic. "How can you ask mercy for these men who never give it?" Be it said for the young men of the barricades that they never surrendered, and equally be it said for Trebassof that he necessarily shot them. "If I had only myself to consider," the general had said to a Paris journalist, "I could have been gentle as a lamb with these unfortunates, and so I should not now myself be condemned to death. After all, I fail to see what they reproach me with. I have served my master as a brave and loyal subject, no more, and, after the fighting, I have let others ferret out the children that had hidden under their mothers' skirts. Everybody talks of the repression of Moscow, but let us speak, my friend, of the Commune. There was a piece of work I would not have done, to massacre within a court an unresisting crowd of men, women and children. I am a rough and faithful soldier of His Majesty, but I am not a monster, and I have the feelings of a husband and father, my dear monsieur. Tell your readers that, if you care to, and do not surmise about whether I appear to regret being condemned to death."

Certainly what stupefied Rouletabille now was this staunch figure of the condemned man who appeared so tranquilly to enjoy his life. When the general was not furthering the gayety of his friends he was talking with his wife and daughter, who adored him and continually fondled him, and he seemed perfectly happy. With his enormous grizzly mustache, his ruddy color, his keen, piercing eyes, he looked the typical spoiled father.

The reporter studied all these widely different types and made his observations while pretending to a ravenous appetite, which served, moreover, to fix him in the good graces of his hosts of the datcha del Iles. But, in reality, he passed the food to an enormous bulldog under the table, in whose good graces he was also thus firmly planting himself. As Trebassof had prayed his companions to let his young friend satisfy his ravenous hunger in peace, they did not concern themselves to entertain him. Then, too, the music served to distract attention from him, and at a moment somewhat later, when Matrena Petrovna turned to speak to the young man, she was frightened at not seeing him. Where had he gone? She went out into the veranda and looked. She did not dare to call. She walked into the grand salon and saw the reporter just as he came out of the sitting-room.

"Where were you?" she inquired.

"The sitting-room is certainly charming, and decorated exquisitely," complimented Rouletabille. "It seems almost a boudoir."

"It does serve as a boudoir for my step-daughter, whose bedroom opens directly from it; you see the door there. It is simply for the present that the luncheon table is set there, because for some time the police have pre-empted the veranda."

"Is your dog a watchdog, madame?" asked Rouletabille, caressing the beast, which had followed him.

"Khor is faithful and had guarded us well hitherto."

"He sleeps now, then?"

"Yes. Koupriane has him shut in the lodge to keep him from barking nights. Koupriane fears that if he is out he will devour one of the police who watch in the garden at night. I wanted him to sleep in the house, or by his master's door, or even at the foot of the bed, but Koupriane said, 'No, no; no dog. Don't rely on the dog. Nothing is more dangerous than to rely on the dog.' Since then he has kept Khor locked up at night. But I do not understand Koupriane's idea."

"Monsieur Koupriane is right," said the reporter. "Dogs are useful only against strangers."

"Oh," gasped the poor woman, dropping her eyes. "Koupriane certainly knows his business; he thinks of everything."

"Come," she added rapidly, as though to hide her disquiet, "do not go out like that without letting me know. They want you in the dining-room."

"I must have you tell me right now about this attempt.

"In the dining-room, in the dining-room. In spite of myself," she said in a low voice, "it is stronger than I am. I am not able to leave the general by himself while he is o nthe ground-floor."

She drew Rouletabille into the dining-room, where the gentlemen were now telling odd stories of street robberies amid loud laughter. Natacha was still talking with Michael Koressoff; Boris, whose eyes never quitted them, was as pale as the wax on his guzla, which he rattled violently from time to time. Matrena made Rouletabille sit in a corner of the sofa, near by, and, counting on her fingers like a careful housewife who does not wish to overlook anything in her domestic calculations, she said:

"There have been three attempts; the first two in Moscow. The first happened very simply. The general knew he had been condemned to death. They had delivered to him at the palace in the afternoon the revolutionary poster which proclaimed his intended fate to the whole city and country. So Feodor, who was just about to ride into the city, dismissed his escort. He ordered horses put to a sleigh. I trembled and asked what he was going to do. He said he was going to drive quietly through all parts of the city, in order to show the Muscovites that a governor appointed according to law by the Little Father and who had in his conscience only the sense that he had done his full duty was not to be intimidated. It was nearly 4 o'clock, toward the end of a Winter day that had been clear and bright, but very cold. I wrapped myself in my furs and took my seat beside him, and he said, 'This is fine, Matrena; this will have a great effect on these imbeciles.' So we started. At first we drove along the Naberjnaia. The sleigh glided like the wind. The general hit the driver a heavy blow in the back, crying, 'Slower, fool; they will think we are afraid,' and so the horses were almost walking when, passing behind the Church of Protection and Intercession, we reached the Place Rouge. Until then the few passers-by had looked at us, and as they recognized him, hurried along to keep him in view. At the Place Rouge there was only a little knot of women kneeling before the Virgin. As soon as these women saw us and recognized the equipage of the Governor, they dispersed like a flock of crows, with frightened cries. Feodor laughed so hard that as we passed under the vault of the Virgin his laugh seemed to shake the stones. I felt reassured, monsieur. Our promenade continued without any remarkable incident. The city was almost deserted. Everything lay prostrated under the awful blow of that battle in the street. Feodor said, 'Ah, they give me a wide berth; they do not know how much I love them, and all through that promenade he said many more charming and delicate things to me.

"As we were talking pleasantly under our furs we came to la Place Koudrinsky, la rue Koudrinsky, to be exact. It was just 4 o'clock, and a light mist had commenced to mix with the sifting snow, and the houses to right and left were visible only as masses of shadow. We glided over the snow like a boat along the river in foggy calm. Then, suddenly, we heard piercing cries and saw shadows of soldiers rushing around, with movements that looked larger than human through the mist; their short whips looked enormous as they knocked some other shadows that we saw down like logs. The general stopped the sleigh and got out to see what was going on. I got out with him. They were soldiers of the famous Semenowsky regiment, who had two prisoners, a young man and a child. The child was being beaten on the nape of the neck. It writhed on the ground and cried in torment. It couldn't have been more than 9 years old. The other, the young man, held himself up and marched along without a single cry as the thongs fell brutally upon him. I was appalled. I did not give my husband time to open his mouth before I called to the subaltern who commanded the detachment, 'You should be ashamed to strike a child and a Christian like that, which cannot defend itself.' The general told him the same thing. Then the subaltern told us that the little child had just killed a lieutenant in the street by firing a revolver, which he showed us, and it was the biggest one I ever have seen, and must have been as heavy for that infant to lift as a small cannon. It was unbelievable.

"'And the other,' demanded the general; 'what has he done?'

"'He is a dangerous student,' replied the subaltern, 'who has delivered himself up as a prisoner because he promised the landlord of the house where he lives that he would do it to keep the house from being battered down with cannon.'

"'But that is right of him. Why do you beat him?'

"'Because he has told us he is a dangerous student.'

"'That is no reason,' Feodor told him. 'He will be shot if he deserves it, and the child also, but I forbid you to beat him. You have not been furnished with these whips in order to beat isolated prisoners, but to charge the crowd when it does not obey the governor's orders. In such a case you are ordered "Charge," and you know what to do. You understand?' Feodor said roughly. 'I am General Trebassof, your governor.'

"Feodor was thoroughly human in saying this. Ah, well, he was badly compensated for it, very badly, I tell you. The student was truly dangerous, because he had no sooner heard my husband say, 'I am General Trebassof, your governor,' than he cried, 'Ah, is it you, Trebassof!' and drew a revolver from no one knows where and fired straight at the general, almost against his breast. But the general was not hit, happily, nor I either, who was by him and had thrown myself onto the student to disarm him and then was tossed about at the feet of the soldiers in the battle they waged around the student while the revolver was going off. Three soldiers were killed. You can understand that the others were furious. They raised me with many excuses and, all together, set to kicking the student in the loins and striking at him as he lay on the ground. The subaltern struck his face a blow that might have blinded him. Feodor hit the officer in the head with his fist and called, 'Didn't you hear what I said?' The officer fell under the blow and Feodor himself carried him to the sleigh and laid him with the dead men. Then he took charge of the soldiers and led them to the barracks. I followed, as a sort of afterguard. We returned to the palace an hour later. It was quite dark by then, and almost at the entrance to the palace we were shot at by a group of revolutionaries who passed swiftly in two sleighs and disappeared in the darkness so fast that they could not be overtaken. I had a ball in my toque. The general had not been touched this time either, but our furs were ruined by the blood of the dead soldiers which they had forgotten to clean out of the sleigh. That was the first attempt, which meant little enough, after all, because it was fighting in the open. It was some days later that they commenced to try assassination."

At this moment Ermolai brought in four bottles of champagne and Thaddeus struck lightly on the piano.

"Quickly, madame, the second attempt," said Rouletabille, who was taking hasty notes on his cuff, never ceasing, meanwhile, to watch the convivial group and listening with both ears wide open to Matrena.

"The second happened still in Moscow. We had had a jolly dinner because we thought that at last the good old days were back and good citizens could live in peace; and Boris had tried out the guzla singing songs of the Orel country to please me; he is so fine and sympathetic. Natacha had gone somewhere or other. The sleigh was waiting at the door and we went out and got in. Almost instantly there was a fearful noise, and we were thrown out into the snow, both the general and me. There remained no trace of sleigh or coachman; the two horses were disemboweled, two magnificent piebald horses, my dear young monsieur, that the general was so attached to. As to Feodor, he had that serious wound in his right leg; the calf was shattered. I simply had my shoulder wrenched, practically nothing. The bomb had been placed under the seat of the unhappy coachman, whose hat alone we found, in a pool of blood. From that attack the general lay two months in bed. In the second month they arrested two servants who were caught one night on the landing leading to the upper floor, where they had no business, and after that I sent at once for our old domestics in Orel to come and serve us. It was discovered that these detected servants were in touch with the revolutionaries, so they were hanged. The Emperor appointed a provisional governor, and now that the general was better we decided on a convalescence for him in the midi of France. We took train for St. Petersburg, but the journey started high fever in my husband and reopened the wound in his calf. The doctors ordered absolute rest and so we settled here in the datcha des Iles. Since then, not a day has passed without the general receiving an anonymous letter telling him that nothing can save him from the revenge of the revolutionaries. He is brave and only smiles over them, but for me, I know well that so long as we are in Russia we have not a moment's security. So I watch him every minute and let no one approach him except his intimate friends and us of the family. I have brought an old gniagnia who watched me grow up, Ermolai, and the Orel servants. In the meantime, two months later, the third attempt suddenly occurred. It is certainly of them all the most frightening, because it is so mysterious, a mystery that has not yet, alas, been solved."

But Athanase Georgevitch had told a "good story" which raised so much hubhub that nothing else could be heard. Feodor Feodorovitch was so amused that he had tears in his eyes.

(To Be Continued.)